

EXPLORING NARRATIVE INNOVATIONS AND INTELLECTUAL QUESTS: A STUDY OF ZIJIANG DING'S *THE ABSURD GENERATION*

Yeyan Gao *

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the narrative innovations employed by Zijiang Ding in his novel, The Absurd Generation, and delve into the intellectual quests depicted. The novel follows the life of Zhao Lu, a Beijing youth known as "Master Lu," as he navigates through various stages of his life. Ding showcases his scholarly characteristics through innovative narrative techniques, including frequent spatial-temporal transfers, shifting points of view, overlapping narrative levels, and the use of meta-narratives, paralepsis, and embedded narratives. These techniques create numerous obstacles and traps for readers, challenging their reading experience while encouraging active participation in interpreting the text. The novel employs a variety of styles, including "visual narration," the fusion of written and spoken language styles, and some features of experimental ethnography, which contribute to its distinctiveness. By portraying Zhao Lu's wandering life, the novel probes into the search for meaning among contemporary Chinese intellectuals, reflecting the author's personal experiences and thoughts on "Culture Break-in."

In Zijiang Ding's latest novel, *The Absurd Generation*, the unwavering spirit of three generations is vividly portrayed as they confront the challenges of destiny. The novel captures their resilience and resistance in the face of death, evoking a profound sense of time and space. Within its pages, a delicate interplay of care and anguish, compassion and introspection, imbues the story with a distinct beauty that harmonizes sensibility and rationality.

The narrative of the novel unfolds through five distinct chapters: the opening chapter, "狂野的少年荒唐" 'Wild Adolescent Ridiculousness'; the second chapter, "無奈的青年荒唐" (Helpless Youthful Ridiculousness); the third chapter, "內斂的中年荒唐" (Introspective Middle-Aged Ridiculousness); the concluding chapter, "莫名的老年荒唐" (Inexplicable Old Age Ridiculousness); and an epilogue chapter. The book follows the life of Zhao Lu 趙路, also known as "Lu Ye-Master Deer 鹿爺,"¹ an Educated Youth in Beijing², as it traces his journey of growth, which serves as the central thread in the narrative, guiding the exploration of his personal development. Through a skillful combination of narrative embedding and prolepses, the novel provides an overarching view and detailed accounts of the familial backgrounds and lives of the characters intertwined with Zhao Lu's own experiences. Additionally, it employs various narrative techniques to offer diverse perspectives on the protagonist's mother and maternal and

* YEYAN GAO is a lecturer at School of Liberal Arts, Xi'an Technological University, and a Ph.D. candidate at School of Chinese Language and Literature, Shaanxi Normal University. Email: gyxit@qq.com.

¹ In English spelling, "Lu" has many homonyms, one of which is "road 路," the other is "land 陸," and one more is "deer 鹿." In Zhao Lu (趙路)'s name, "Lu" originally means "road."

² Educated youth, 知青 *zhīqīng*, refers to the educated young people sent from urban areas to the countryside or rural areas during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China. For more information on the Educated Youth, kindly consult Chen Sihe (2001, 15).

paternal grandparents across different chapters.

The novel intricately depicts the life of its protagonist through the perspective of Porpoise (江豚), Zhao Lu's childhood friend and a sociologist residing in the United States. This unique viewpoint adds a realistic yet aesthetically distant lens to Zhao Lu's experiences. In Porpoise's eyes, Zhao Lu embodies an 反英雄 (anti-hero) status (viii), navigating the space between criminality and virtue, commonality and aristocracy, and bridging the gap between the illiterate and scholarly realms. Despite these complexities, Zhao Lu emerges as the novel's hero, showcasing his inherent 本善 (original goodness,) 本真 (original truth) and 本在 (original being) as emphasized by the author in the Preface. (viii)

While the novel aims to remain grounded and cater to a broad readership by exploring timeless literary themes of love and death, the author surpasses mere storytelling, delving into loftier ambitions and intellectual pursuits. The meticulous weaving of the text not only expresses the spiritual aspirations of individual intellectuals and their profound contemplations on modern existence but also encompasses social relationships, lifestyles, folk culture, explorations of human nature, changes in kinship systems, and profound inquiries into the human spirit within the novel's framework. As a result, it forms a grand panorama of social history, creating a magnificent tapestry of intertwined narratives.

In addition to its conceptual depth and visionary scope, the novel's structure unveils unmistakable "elegant cultural attributes" inherent to scholarly literature. It deftly blends traditional Chinese literary conventions with post-modern sensibilities, resulting in a harmonious fusion. While specific innovations in structural organization and narrative techniques may impact the novel's accessibility and immediate enjoyment, Ding's daring endeavor to transcend disciplinary boundaries and forge connections between sociology, folklore, philosophy, and literature provides readers with a refreshing and empowering reading experience. This approach grants readers more excellent agency in interpretation, inviting them to derive personal meaning from the reading process actively.

I. Intricate Narrative Techniques

The novel takes readers on a global journey, traversing China and reaching as far as Thailand, Burma, Russia, and Eastern Europe. Its timeline spans over a century, stretching from the late Qing Dynasty to the 2020s, capturing many historical periods. The writing style boldly disregards traditional omniscient perspectives and linear structures, instead embracing frequent temporal and spatial shifts, alternating perspectives, overlapping narrative levels, and utilizing Meta-Narrative, Paralepsis, and embedded narratives. These deliberate choices create numerous obstacles and traps for readers, challenging their reading experience while compelling them to actively participate in constructing the meaning of the text.

This novel encompasses two distinct narrative layers. The first layer immerses readers in a present-time setting, narrated from the first-person perspective of Porpoise. Within this layer, Master Deer (nickname, his real name is 趙路 Zhao Lu), Trilobite (nickname, she is Zhao Lu's sister, and her real name is 趙葉 Zhao Ye), Porpoise (nickname and the narrator, his real name is 元江 Yuan Jiang), and Mole (Nickname, he is Zhao Ye's husband and his real name is 洪燕生 Hong Yansheng) engage in reading Porpoise's manuscript, progressing linearly throughout the story. The first layer is

introduced in the prologue. It appears intermittently throughout the text in boldface dialogue within or at the end of chapters, distinguishing it from the subsequent discourse layer that holds a more flexible position.

The second narrative layer, constituting the primary thread of the novel, unfolds through Porpoise's vivid depiction of the protagonist's and the group of childhood friends' fateful journeys. It combines a first-person experiential and retrospective point of view with a third-person omniscient perspective whenever the narrator is absent. Notably, this second layer of discourse eventually converges with the "present" in the novel's conclusion, establishing a connection with the first narrative layer.

Furthermore, as the novel progresses into its third chapter, the second discursive layer forms "narrative embeddings" (Genette, 1980, 46). Here, the narrator embeds another complete narrative structure within the main thread, creating a "story within a story" effect and a complementary relationship with the main body. It expands the narrative time and perspective to a significant extent. In the third chapter, a fictionalized account based on fieldwork and interviews explores the life of Zhao Lu's mother, Yueti 月啼 (nickname, her real name is 路純瑛 Lu Chunying). Readers may notice that the narrative time advances to an autumn night shortly after China's War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), and the perspective shifts to an omniscient viewpoint, resulting in a transition from the rationality and calmness of the preceding chapters to an emotionally lyrical tone. As Porpoise remarks, the text becomes highly 文學 'literary' (120) and 雅性 'elegant' (120) with the inclusion of various legends that add mysterious and mystical elements to the story.

Another instance of a "story within a story" emerges in Chapter 9, presenting a sociological "case study" of Zhao Lu's paternal family. After the narrator explains the reasons for investigating, he deftly weaves together the second layer of discourse and the narrative embedding. This interweaving technique combines time, space, and characters, creating an organic fusion within the narrative fabric.

The novel employs a two-tiered narrative structure and captivates with its intriguing shifts in perspective. In general, the narrative employs an omniscient perspective or third-person limited view. However, this novel further incorporates the limited perspectives of various characters. It utilizes "paralepsis"³ based on investigative interviews, resulting in a tapestry of multiple worlds and juxtapositions of time and space. Through this multi-perspective approach, the novel breaks free from narrative conventions, constantly transitioning between first-person internal and external perspectives, as well as third-person limited and omniscient perspectives, to develop the thread of the protagonist, Zhao Lu and his entourage of characters, including his parents and grandparents.

In traditional literature, if the author used first-person narratives, it would be confined to a limited point of view, preventing the narrator from freely expanding their narrative space or exploring the characters' innermost thoughts. However, in the realm of postmodern literature, narrative techniques defy these traditional restrictions, taking the form of "a first-person narrator (or a historiographer) narrating what somebody else

³ Paralepsis refers to a literary device where a narrator or historiographer goes beyond their proper competence by providing information or insights about someone else's thoughts or events they did not witness. It often occurs when a first-person narrator assumes the authority to narrate another character's thoughts or describes events that took place in their absence, which is considered a violation of their narrative boundaries (Jahn, 2021, 57).

thought or what happened when s/he was not present (illicit assumption of authorial competence)” (Jahn, 2021, 57). Heinze further distinguishes *paralepsis* (Heinze, 2008, 279-297). According to Heinze, the narratives of Zhao Lu’s maternal and paternal grandfathers take place within an unnatural overall framework, allowing for the portrayal of the forefathers’ psychological activities, ideologies, and mannerisms that cannot be directly observed. As a result, it challenges mimetic theories, transcends horizons, and reflects the author’s exploration of various narrative techniques. This novel follows a similar pattern, as the entirety of the text is presented from the perspective of the narrator, “Porpoise.” However, it surpasses the constraints of this singular viewpoint by utilizing various narrative techniques. These techniques, including investigation, narration, and recording, not only offer a wide-ranging vision but also delve into the depths of each character, showcasing the author’s aesthetic approach of multi-level observation, referred to as the 散點透視 ‘Scatter Perspective’ (xi). Originally an artistic term, the author appropriates this concept to dissolve the logical transition between characters and focuses on the expansiveness of the observational field, the shifting perspectives, the diverse character portrayals, and the profound exploration of human nature. The aim is to present a grand panorama and intricately depicted landscapes akin to the renowned Chinese scroll painting “Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival” (清明上河圖), to conduct a multifaceted exploration under the literary vision that reflects a diverse, layered, and multi-angled depiction of social life.

Rather than adhering to the conventional structure of linear time, the textual narrative disrupts and jumbles fragments, liberating itself from rigid aesthetic forms and challenging the continuity of time and fixed spaces. The novel commences with a “決鬥” (duel) on “西元 1967 年 10 月 31 日，農曆丁未年兼羊年⁴，即一個非常之年深秋一天的清晨 8 時整” (October 31, 1967, at 8:00 a.m., a late autumn day in the Sheep Year of Ding Wei- a special year in history (2). However, the narrative time does not progress linearly due to the author’s reweaving of discourse layers. Instead, it shifts to approximately three hours before the duel, stating, “大約三小時前” (About three hours ago) (3). Not content with flashbacks alone, the author employs various techniques during the three-hour preparation period for the duel. The narrator incorporates narration interspersed with flashbacks, *prolepses*, and *analepses*, hindering the linear flow of time. Readers’ understanding of the process is consistently disrupted by phrases like “趙路的外號叫鹿爺” (Zhao Lu’s nickname is Master Deer) (3) and “三葉蟲趙葉性格與舉止就像一個小男孩” (Trilobite [Zhao Ye] has the personality and demeanor of a young boy) (3). These interruptions signify a pause in narrative time, while phrases such as “此時” ‘at the moment’ (6) and “一路上” (along the way) (7) convey the ongoing

⁴ The Year of Ding Wei is a term used in traditional Chinese timekeeping known as Gan-Zhi or the sexagenary cycle. This method, utilized throughout Chinese history, marks the passage of years, months, days, and hours. It consists of Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches derived from the stems and branches of a tree. The Gan-Zhi system, also called the Stem-Branch, is based on combinations of ten heavenly stems and twelve earthly branches. Each year is represented by a pairing of one stem and one branch. The Year of Ding Wei symbolizes the forty-fourth year within the sexagenary cycle, with “Ding” representing the heavenly stem and “Wei” representing the earthly branch. The next Ding Wei Year will occur 60 years later. Hence, in the context of the book, the Ding Wei year corresponds to the year 1967 within the sexagenary cycle.

progression of the time. Notably, the recurring prolepses, such as “幾十年後” (decades later) (56), “這是後話暫且不表” (This is a matter for the future, which shall be left unmentioned for now) (56) and “人們沒有料到” (people did not expect it) (26) inject values and destiny into the text. While the actual duration of the duel in the first chapter spans only three hours within the story, the narrator’s structural reorganization, along with the implementation of various narrative techniques, expands its portrayal to encompass 11 subsections and 47 pages at the discursive layer. Due to the constant changes in the narrative subject, theme, setting, and time, the narrative time intertwines between the parents’ past experiences, the protagonist’s current actions, and childhood friends’ intertwined backgrounds and future destinies. Consequently, a fragmented textual collage effect is created, prompting readers to “actively draw upon life experiences to construct stories independent of discourse” (Shen & Wang, 2010. 21). The fragmented nature of the narrative discourse achieves multiple effects. It implies the protagonist’s confusion and sense of disorder, establishes a multidimensional and spatial depth in the historical narrative, and elongates readers’ perception of time while deepening their understanding. Ultimately, these techniques enhance the intrigue of the narrative.

In contrast to the linear narrative in the first two chapters, Chapter 3 showcases a non-linear structure regarding Zhao Lu’s maternal grandparents. The narrative in this chapter alternates between different periods. It starts with Shunzi (順子), Zhao Lu’s maternal grandfather, fleeing from his home with his wife and daughter after China’s War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945). It then advances 23 years to around 1922, when the story’s focus transitions to his mother giving birth to her 13th child. Subsequently, readers must meticulously assemble the sequence of events through fragmented clues provided by the narrator. The narrative time exhibits a subtle oscillation, primarily moving forward until the moment of Shunzi’s escape with his wife and daughter, thus forming a closed loop within the narrative. To accentuate this contrast further, the story time and narrative time extracted from Chapter 3 are presented in the table below:

Story Time	Event	Narrative Time	Event
When Shunzi was 12 years old,	He Ziming saved his mother.	When the war ended,	Shunzi fled with his family.
After He Ziming cured his mother,	Shunzi formally apprenticed to He Ziming, a famous Traditional Chinese Medicine Gynaecologist.	A winter night in 1922 when Shunzi is 15 years old,	His mother gave birth to her 13th child.
When Shunzi was 13 years old.	He witnessed his mother’s secret meeting with Peng Da.	When Shunzi was 13 years old.	He witnessed his mother’s secret meeting with Peng Da.
After becoming a disciple under He Ziming,	Shunzi went to secondary school and graduated in two years.	A few months prior to that winter night in 1922,	Shunzi made abortifacient drugs.
A few months prior to that winter night in 1922,	Shunzi made abortifacient drugs.	When Shunzi was 12,	He Ziming saved his mother.

A winter night in 1922, when Shunzi was 15 years old,	His mother gave birth to her 13th child.	A winter night in 1922	Shunzi's mother died.
On a winter night in 1922,	Shunzi's mother died.	The night when he accompanied to his mother's burial,	His mother's lover, Pang Da, was forced to jump into the water with her newborn baby; Yue Shude escaped from prison and was shot to death.
The night when he accompanied to his mother's burial,	His mother's lover, Pang Da, was forced to jump into the water with her newborn baby; Yue Shude escaped from prison and was shot to death.	After the death of parents,	His sister Yingzi got married.
After the death of parents,	His sister Yingzi got married.	After the victory of China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression	Shunzi told Yueti that he is her biological father.
A summer day after Shunzi graduated from high school,	Shunzi changed his name to Hwasheng and was recruited by Shi Zhongyi to study at Huiren Medical College in the provincial capital. (Ruishuang was 14 years old at that time).	After becoming a disciple under He Ziming,	Shunzi went to secondary school and graduated in two years.
After four years of studying at Medical College,	Hwasheng (Shunzi) graduated from Huiren Medical College (20 years old).	A summer day after Shunzi graduated from high school,	Shunzi changed his name to Hwasheng and was recruited by Shi Zhongyi to study at Huiren Medical College in the provincial capital. (Ruishuang was 14 years old at that time).
One month before returning to his master's clinic,	Master He Ziming was castrated by a warlord Cao.	After four years of studying at Medical College,	Hwasheng (Shunzi) graduated from Huiren Medical College (20 years old then).
When he returned to his master's clinic half a month after graduation,	He met his master's wife Pei Ruixue. (Ruixue was 28 years old, and Pei Ruifang was 18.)	When he returned to his master's clinic half a month after graduation,	He met his master's wife Pei Ruixue. (Ruixue was 28 years old, and Pei Ruifang was 18.)
When he returned to his master's clinic half a month after graduation,	He met Master He Ziming.	One month before returning to his master's clinic,	Master He Ziming was castrated by a warlord Cao.

After meeting Master He Ziming,	Determined to avenge his master, he abandoned his studies in Japan.	When he returned to his master's clinic half a month after graduation,	He met Master He Ziming.
.....	After He Ziming cured his mother.	Shunzi formally apprenticed to He Ziming, a famous Traditional Chinese Medicine Gynaecologist.
After the victory of China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression	Shunzi told Yueti that he was her biological father.	After meeting Master He Ziming,	Determined to avenge his master, he abandoned his studies in Japan.
When the war ended,	Shunzi fled with his family.	When the war ended.	Shunzi fled with his family.

Drawing from the temporal markers presented in the table above, such as the Northern Expeditionary Army's attack, China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression, and the specific location of events in Yuewuzhuang (岳武莊) on the Jizhong Plain, a rough estimation of the timeframe in which the plot unfolds can be inferred. Notably, "China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression" serves as a precise time marker from which the narrative process commences, briefly returning to this point before progressing downstream. Additionally, more minor points in time, such as the "光復前 23 年冬夜" 'the winter night 23 years before the victory of China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression' (65) and "畢業後" 'after graduation' (77) propel the discourse forward, elucidating aspects such as Shunzi's specialization in gynecology, his animosity towards his mother's childbirth, and the current crisis faced by his mother.

The work delves into the exploration and expansion of narrative perspectives. The narrator's setting and the overall narrative construction exhibit diversity and uncertainty. Throughout the gradual progression of the narration, readers are led by the narrator to immerse themselves in an absurd and treacherous storyline. However, the narrative is swiftly punctuated by the narrator's retrospective viewpoint and critical dialogue in the initial narrative layer, allowing for rational comprehension and deepened understanding. Employing shifting and limited perspectives alongside an omniscient point of view presented during interviews, the work provides readers with a comprehensive vision and access to the character's innermost thoughts. This departure from conventional narrative practices facilitates profound rational contemplation and exploration of the historical significance, transcending the emotional constraints of previous narratives and prominently showcasing the scholarly novel's characteristic rationality, bearing the imprint of "post-modern" storytelling.

Another salient characteristic of postmodernity evident in the text is the presence of meta-narratives across various sections. Meta-narrative emerges as a form of "self-awareness of narration" (Wang, 2016, 55-61), wherein the initiation, process, and significance of writing are revealed, thus transforming storytelling into the subject of the story. As Shen Dan posits, whether in metafiction or general fiction, the act or process of narration becomes apparent to the reader only when it becomes the object of narration, thereby becoming an integral component of the text (17). While the process of writing

itself may not be explicitly unveiled within the text, readers may discern the author's original intention to interweave the dialogue between the four individuals introduced at the beginning, engaging in reading and commenting on the text throughout the main body of the novel. This deftly integrates the principles of metafictional self-referentiality and interpretation into the fabric of the narrative. For instance, the conversation between the narrator and the protagonists in the introduction regarding the content and value of the text leads to Master Deer's own response to the novel, arguing that the text does not “為尊者諱” (cover up the faults of the honorable) (x), thus affirming the authenticity of the text within the text. Mole questions the novel's writing style, asserting that it lacks a traditional structure of “起承轉合” (exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution) (x), but instead follows the narrator's “情感邏輯.” (emotional logic) (x) Mole also observes that the novel's tone diverges from the traditional Chinese literary tradition, which emphasizes temperance in happiness and sorrow, advocates self-restraint, and upholds the aesthetic doctrine of the Mean (中庸). Towards the end of the book, Trilobite and Mole critique the title and structure of the book, further contributing to the discourse. Hence, these characters' confusion and skepticism about the text serve to highlight the author's hidden intentions: not only to reveal the creative process through metafictional self-referentiality but also to question and subvert the sanctity of discourse through the characters' debates with the narrator regarding the novel's writing style. As Wang Zhengzhong explains, this can either reinforce the illusion of authenticity within the narrative or expose the constructed or fictional nature of the storytelling process (55-61). As previously mentioned, Chapter 3 employs the technique of narrative embedding whereby the narrator presents the background of Zhao Lu's maternal grandfather. In this chapter, the narrator and other characters in the first layer of discourse directly question the lyrical tone and creative process of the textual depiction of the background. They express doubts such as, “不過連我這個女性看來，這些文字過於陰柔，再直白點說，充滿了娘娘氣……本姑奶奶看來，一定雇了網上寫手，而且是個女的，也許是變性的！” (But even from a female perspective like mine, these words are too feminine, to put it bluntly, full of a queenly air... It seems that this lady must have hired an online ghostwriter and a female one at that, maybe even a transgender) (119) and “田鼠的二姐田峭……被自己的文字加工感動得一塌糊塗，也難免將她本人的想像擠揉摻雜進去。遺憾的是她把我們原來的調侃文字暴粗語氣幾乎一掃而空” (The second sister of Tian Shu, Tian Qiao... was so moved by her own elaborated words that she inevitably mixed her own imagination into them. Unfortunately, she completely abandoned our original mocking tone and vulgar language.) (120). This discussion not only explains the change in the chapter's lyrical style and the shift towards a more delicate tone but also blurs the boundaries between the narrative discourse and the factual story through the objectification of the narrative act.

Implementing the meta-narrative technique in the novel not only breaks down the barriers between story and discourse but also significantly influences the reader's interpretive judgment. Through the narrative judgments of the narrators within the text (Porpoise, Master Deer, Trilobite, and Mole), the ethical standpoint of the implied author becomes evident to the reader. For instance, the bold dialogue in the second section of Chapter 2 presents a conversation between Trilobite, Mole, and the narrator, Porpoise (Jiang Tun), as they discuss the incident of “borrowing” books in 1966. Standing in the present time, they provide explanations and defenses for their past actions while also

highlighting the implicit disagreement from the reader regarding the act of “stealing.” Furthermore, it implies a critique of the societal and historical background where people had to resort to theft to pursue their aspirations for knowledge, thus questioning the idealistic desires (the pursuit of knowledge) that had to be attained through illicit means.

三葉蟲：那時，高爾基的那句名言：“書是人類進步的階梯，……”

攝鼠：一位學者作了這樣的分析：偷書、讀書固然離追求知識的一面，……

江豚：很多年之後，我讀到了澳大利亞作家蘇薩克的名作《偷書賊》，……(55)

Trilobite: At that time, there was that famous saying by Gorky: “Books are the ladder of human progress...”

Mole: A scholar made the following analysis: Stealing books and reading them undoubtedly have an aspect of pursuing knowledge...

Porpoise: Years later, I read Australian writer Markus Zusak’s masterpiece *The Book Thief* ...

In Chapter 1, Section 8, when discussing the choice of the Royal Nunnery (皇姑庵 *Huanggu An*) as the location for Snow Fox’s duel (nickname, her real name is 薛曉白 *Xue Xiaobai*), both Zhao Luand Wolf Master (nickname, his real name is 朗興國 *Lang Xingguo*) present their reasons in the first and second narrative layers respectively. In the first narrative layer, Master Deer dismisses the rumors surrounding the Royal Nunnery mentioned in the second narrative, stating, “故弄玄虛，我就不信這個邪！” ‘Fabricated tales, I refuse to believe such wickedness!’ (38) However, the implied author foreshadows *Xue Xiaobai*’s fate, indirectly validating the rumors.

The bold dialogue in Section 3 of Chapter 2 portrays the admiration and appreciation of the main characters in the first layer of narration towards the characters in the second layer of storytelling. Phrases such as “難以想像竟有這樣文學心境的女性” (I did not expect there to be a woman with such a literary sensibility’)(58) and “那時的我，對田峭相當崇拜” (At that time, I greatly admired Tian Qiao) (58) guide the readers’ understanding and judgment of the characters. Comments like “沒想到我的姥爺如此狠心” (I did not expect my grandfather to be so heartless)(67) lead the readers to morally and ethically evaluate the plot of the text from a different perspective.

In addition to its roles in indoctrination and ethics, the novel also showcases its function of knowledge transfer through dialogues. Traditional literature often highlights the instructive function of expanding readers’ knowledge, such as familiarizing them with bird species, animals, plants, and trees.⁵ Such knowledge expansion through the voices of characters serves the purpose of helping people acquire knowledge in this novel, too. For instance, in Chapter 9, after describing the architectural form of Zhao Jinxiong’s mansion (Zhao Lu’s father’s younger male cousin 趙金雄), Porpoise, Trilobite, and Mole engage in

⁵ In *Confucian Analects*, it is said that “[T]he Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them, one might learn the more immediate duty of serving one’s father and the remoter of serving one’s prince. From them, we become acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.” Note: The translation of the passage is based on the interpretation provided by James Legge, as found in his translation of *The Analects of Confucius*. (323)

a discussion about its cultural connotations, religious consciousness, geomantic omen, and folk psychology. They remark, “這座房舍和莊裡絕大多數人家的宅子一樣，乃黃河流域居家文化的延伸。不管有意還是無意，似乎都依著泛神論和泥土占卜學，考慮到了風水與自然的和諧，同時又強調了以‘本家為天下’的自我意識在獨門獨院中的各行其是，並且選用了一種無為而無不為的心境和處事方式，默默地順應著壓在頭頂上的杳穹，而悄悄地趨利避害” (This house, like the majority of houses in the village, is an extension of the home culture prevalent in the Yellow River basin. Whether by design or happenstance, it embraces pantheism and earth divination while considering the harmonious interplay between feng shui⁶ and nature. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the various manifestations of the notion of ‘home as the world’ within each household. It also adopts a state of mind and approach called ‘wuwei’ [無為]—seemingly effortless yet all-encompassing,⁷ silently conforming to pressure from the vast expanse above while quietly seeking advantages and avoiding harm) (268). The knowledge about the cultural significance of the house and its connection to the broader home culture in the region is conveyed through dialogues.

In chapter 3, the statement “江蘇大墩子的一個原始墓葬中，死於 14-23 歲的有二十一具，其中女子就有十三具，大部死於難產或女性疾病” (In a primitive tomb in Dadunzi, Jiangsu Province, there were twenty-one deaths between the ages of 14 and 23, with thirteen of them being women who mostly perished during childbirth or due to female ailments) (80) not only exemplifies the function of literature in understanding society but also closely integrates with the narrative, providing empirical support for the investigation into the motivations behind Zhao Lu’s maternal grandfather’s study of gynecology.

II. Splendid Style of Writing

The book covers 110 years, from the 1910s to the 2020s, and revolves around 5-7 main characters, supported by nearly 200 secondary characters. To effectively encompass a wide range of content within 390,000 words, the narrative achieves an impressive density through its skillful use of visualized storytelling language. As expressed by Chen Zhongshi, “Using conventional descriptive writing would undeniably result in a lengthy book. The only solution I could think of was to unify the entire work with narrative language and condense intricate descriptions into visualized storytelling. The challenge of this approach lies in the requirement for visualized storytelling, particularly in character portrayal”(16). Ding adeptly incorporates visualization in various instances, seamlessly blending dialogues into the narrative language to depict character portraits and complex

⁶ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, feng shui is a system of spiritual influences, good and evil, which inhabit the natural features of landscapes in Chinese mythology; hence, a kind of geomancy for dealing with these influences in determining sites for houses and graves.

⁷ The concept of “wuwei,” or actionless action, in Chinese culture stems from the idea expressed in Lao Tse’s *Tao Te Ching*: “The Tao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do.” It primarily suggests that humans should follow the principles of nature, align with its natural flow, and refrain from unnecessary interference. One should not engage in unnecessary actions but must still fulfill the responsibilities as a part of nature and society by the natural order. Note: The translation of the term is based on the interpretation provided by James Legge, as found in his translation of Lao Tse’s *Tao Te Ching* (67).

human behaviors. When describing Tian Qiao's serious demeanor, he observes, “恐怕她最大的缺點就是毫無幽默感，有一次，為了爭論什麼是幽默，氣都差一點沒有喘過來，以致到了幾乎休克的地步。” (Perhaps her most notable flaw is her complete lack of a sense of humor. Once, during a debate about what constitutes humor, she became so worked up that she almost could not catch her breath, reaching a point close to shock.) (57) Furthermore, the precision and meticulousness of scholars are evident in the depiction of Master Wolf's sword: “好劍！德國進口，品質一流，高錳鋼制，三棱型，長 110 釐米，重 770 克，劍本身長 90 釐米，寬 2.4 毫米，劍柄 20 釐米，護手盤深度 5.5 釐米，直徑 13.5 釐米，偏心度 3.5 釐米。為便於決鬥，特將劍頭打磨尖了，一劍便可穿心！” (What a remarkable sword! It boasts exceptional quality and is crafted from high manganese steel imported from Germany. With its tripartite design, it measures 110 cm in length and weighs 770 grams. The blade spans 90 cm, with a width of 2.4 mm, while the hilt extends for 20 cm. The guard disc, with a depth of 5.5 cm, has a diameter of 13.5 cm and is positioned 3.5 cm off-center. Specifically tailored for dueling, the sword's tip has been meticulously polished and sharpened to pierce through the heart with a single, decisive strike!)(33)

Concise and precise language does not equate to simplicity. The novel masterfully employs visualized storytelling language without sacrificing depth or complexity. It seamlessly weaves vivid and intricate details throughout time and space by extensively incorporating various written language styles, such as official documents, letters, essays, reports, speeches, poetry, textual research, etc. This fusion of fiction and reality creates a cohesive whole. For example, the novel includes Bumblebee's (黃先平, one of their friends) Referee Appointment Letter, which is recited to the audience gathered at the gate of Huanggu'an (32). Raccoon (宦容容) introduces folk experts' textual research as evidence to support the claim of “拆嗑葉子” (26)⁸; Tian Qiao (田峭) presents a report in the book club exploring the literary allure of female murders (57); Folk historians provide insightful commentaries, reflecting on the activities and significance of the Salon (59). Lin Yan (林雁) composes a 1,500-word essay on love, drawing inspiration from Plato's poem (393-394); Zhao Lu writes the lyrics of the song “我又愛又恨的白樺林” “The Birch Grove I Love and Hate” (367). Zhang Yuhai (張育海), a young man who tragically lost his life in Burma while fighting alongside the Burmese Communist guerrillas, pens a heartfelt letter (147-149). Trilobite and Zhao Haitian (趙海天), a descendant of Zhao Gongzhuang 趙公莊, compose a comprehensive 2,000-word essay delving into the evolution of the clan's power in Zhao Gongzhuang (278-279). Furthermore, to validate Master Wolf's literary prowess, it is mentioned that he “炮製了不少相當有思想性、批判性加文采性的宣言、檄文、論文以及演說稿” (produced numerous thought-provoking, critical, and eloquent manifestos, proclamations, essays, and speech drafts)(23), and two of his essays are cited as examples. One delves into the “Fox

⁸ In slang, "Yezi" refers to money. "Chaida"拆嗑 carries a slightly milder connotation than outright grabbing. In this context, "chaida yezi" implies the relatively gentler act of obtaining money from someone, with a slightly persuasive tone and also carrying a sense of coercion.

Spirit⁹ Complex of the Chinese People” (21-22), while the other explores “The Secrets of Playing Politics” (23-25), among others. Unlike other writers, the author presents the main content of the essay, demonstrating great persuasiveness and speculative thinking. Particularly in the essay “The Secrets of Politics,” historical documents are consulted, the global situation is examined, and the current circumstances are scrutinized. The character’s remarkable literary flair is exhibited.

In addition to a diverse range of written languages, the novel incorporates various oral language styles, including folk ballads, folk songs, work songs, nursery rhymes, the local Shaanxi melody known as Xintianyou (信天遊), etc. The author strategically selects the most suitable literary style to enhance the narrative in different contexts. Integrating vernacular and literary language creates a cohesive and mutually reinforcing whole. For example, in Heyue Tang 賀月堂, Zhao Lu’s mother hums a catchy ditty: “啥個是命命字是只蝶/啥個是緣緣字是個結/……” (What is life? Life is a butterfly. / What is fate? Fate is a knot. / ...) (63-64) The ferryman sings a nursery rhyme: “八月子到鎮口/娘老子氣懵了頭/……” (In August, they reach the town, parents’ minds in a frown. / ...) (79) The Taoist Chang Zhen 常真道長 sings a song of karma (86,96). The poetic verses evoke imagery: “羽披成鬃, 翅倔如鐵, 有白紫藍黑棕, 扶搖長毛兒, 曳風撇。……” (Feathers draped as a mane, / wings stubborn, not in vain, / White, purple, blue, black, and brown, colors that remain. / Gracefully ascending, leaving feathers, untamed...) (139); The ballad of the burlak goes: “篙一撐, 櫓一搖/揚起帆兒四海漂……” (Pole a push, or a sway, / Hoist the sail, set forth, and play. / Across the seas, drifting free...) (187). The boatmen’s chants and calls vary in tone, ranging from high and bold to low and mournful. With a blend of humor and vigor, they roared in unison with their chants: “嗨呵呵嗨呵呵嗨呵 / 光棍漢哪不值錢啦……” (Hey ho ho, hey ho ho, hey ho! / Bachelors worthless, ain’t worth a penny!...) (189). A nursery rhyme widely circulated in the countryside about laughing at Guizai (鬼崽): “鬼崽身鬼崽臉兒, 歪鼻子大斜眼兒……” (With ghostly form and ghostly face, / A crooked nose, eyes slanted in place...) (318). On the journey to Shanxi province, the Xintianyou can be heard reciting, “皇帝老兒吃的果果子啣, 咱爺爺先嘗嘗 / 皇帝老兒穿的袍袍子啣, 咱爺爺先擋擋……” (Let’s sample fruits the emperor adored. / Let’s don the emperor’s robe...) (342). These juxtapositions of different styles and tones create an elegant yet accessible atmosphere. So, it is dignified and humorous and suits refined and popular tastes.

Apart from utilizing precise and refined language and incorporating a blend of formal and informal elements, the novel’s scholarly demeanor is also evident in the written characteristics of the oral dialogues among the educated youth during their adolescent years. Take the argument leading up to the duel as an example, where students from opposing factions engage in a dialogue to ascertain the justification of the impending confrontation:

“在歐洲中世紀, 決鬥有無可替代的公正性!”

⁹ The Fox Spirit 狐狸精 is a mysterious creature in Chinese mythology. It usually possesses beauty and magical powers, can assume human form, and often seduces men.

“歐洲中世紀最黑暗！當下是 20 世紀 60 年代！歷史不能倒退！”(33)

“In medieval Europe, dueling possesses an irreplaceable sense of fairness and justice!”

“Medieval Europe’s darkest era, but now it’s the 1960s! History cannot be reversed, and progress is the way forward!”

When “I” attempted to dissuade Master Wolf in a hushed manner, he not only defended himself by citing passages from Zhuangzi’s “Discoursing on Swords”¹⁰, but his teammates also brought up various literary allusions. These allusions included the duel between Paris and Menelaus in the Troy War, the dueling traditions of Germanic countries as described by Tacitus, the renowned duels involving Pushkin, and Confucius’ account of Zi Lu’s son, Zi Cui, seeking vengeance through a duel (34-36). These examples, spanning ancient and modern times, served as evidence to justify the legitimacy of dueling.

The dialogues and narration in the duel scenes also exhibit scholarly characteristics. Master Wolf initiated the scene by reciting a poem: “十年磨一劍，霜刃未曾試，今日把示君，誰有不平事？”¹¹ For ten years, I have honed a sword with care. Its frosty blade is yet to be laid bare. Today, I reveal to you, my friend. Who has suffered an unjust end? (39) The narrator further described the atmosphere of the scene using phrases like “君臨天下的態勢” (the power to rule over the world) (39), “精神先飽受屈辱” (the spirit first suffers humiliation) (39), “使之臣服” (subjugation) (39), and “肉體的毀滅” (physical destruction) (39), along with Bai Juyi’s poem line, “拾得折劍頭，不知折之由……” (I found a broken sword’s severed head/Yet how it shattered, I do not tread...) (39), etc. These citations not only dissolved preconceived notions about dueling but also deepened readers’ understanding of the character’s cultural background, knowledge structure, and problem-solving approach.

Throughout the duel, the text made a total of 17 references, ranging from Jia Dao (779-843 AD), Bai Juyi (772-846 AD), Zhuangzi (approximately 369 BC – approximately 286 BC), Pliny (23 AD to 79 AD), Zhang Hua (232 – 300 AD), Sha Tianxiang (the late Ming Dynasty), Du Fu (712–770AD), Wen Tingyun (approximately 812 - approximately 866AD), Mao Zedong (1893 -1976 AD), Karl Heinrich Marx (1818 – 1883 AD), Li Bai (701–762 AD), Wen Tianxiang (1236–1283 AD), Yue Fei (1103-1142 AD), to Napoléon Bonaparte (1769 – 1821 AD) whether ancient or modern, domestic or foreign, high or low status, familiar or elegant, all fall within the citation

¹⁰ “Discoursing on Swords” (说剑) is a renowned chapter discussing Zhuangzi’s views on the sword. It portrays how King Wen of Zhao was fond of swords and would spend his days associating with swordsmen rather than attending to state affairs. Zhuangzi went to persuade him and explained that there are three types of swords: “the sword of the Son of Heaven,” “the sword of the feudal lord,” and “the sword of the commoner.” Subtly, Zhuangzi indicated that King Wen’s actions were akin to “the sword of the commoner,” but he hoped that he could become “the sword of the Son of Heaven.” Note: The translation of the terms is based on the interpretation provided by Burton Watson, as found in his translation of Zhuangzi. (266-270)

¹¹ The poem cited here is titled “Swordsman” (剑客), written by Jia Dao (贾岛 779-843 AD), a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty.

¹² The poem referenced here is titled “A Broken Sword” (折剑头) and was written by Bai Juyi (白居易 772-846 AD), a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty.

scope.

The formalization of the dialogue not only indirectly reflects the high level of knowledge held by the group of childhood friends but also contributes to shaping the image of the educated youth with a penchant for knowledge and a tendency to show off their intellectual prowess. Particularly successful is Master Wolf, who skillfully incorporates quotes from Zhuangzi even during the duel, demonstrating his effortless mastery and exceptional skill. However, this showmanship and divided attention undoubtedly foreshadow his subsequent failure in the duel.

Upon arriving at Zhao Gongzhuang for their sociological field investigation, the narrator, Porpoise, and his friends adopt a dual approach. Firstly, they analyzed research findings by incorporating perspectives from Trilobite and Zhao Haitian, a young resident of Zhao Gongzhuang, and utilized excerpts from academic essays for theoretical analysis. Secondly, they employed a narrative style to convey their insights and emotions during the investigation. This approach draws parallels with literary works in the genre of sociological observations, such as Lin Yueh-Hwa's "The Golden Wings: A Family Chronicle" and Zhuang Kongshao's "The Silver Wings: Local Society and Cultural Changes in China (the 1920s-1980s)."¹³ These works revolve around the fate of families in a rural Chinese village, aiming to depict the lives of ordinary people, fragmented events, turbulent times, and enigmatic destinies they encounter. The authors extensively employed sociology and anthropology fieldwork methods, immersing themselves in the local community to describe and analyze their observations, records, and active participation. Through this immersive approach, they extracted universal principles that transcend specific contexts.

It should be noted that while sociological essays emphasize the creation of discursive frameworks, cultural form formation, and critical reflection on existing theories, experimental ethnographies diverge from the traditional "textual generalization method" of functionalist ethnography (Li, 2004, 155). Instead, it employs a literary approach, skillfully using literary techniques to present sociological research findings as textual material. This interdisciplinary convergence of sociology and literature is evident through the incorporation of sociological methods in literary creation and the utilization of literary techniques in writing about sociological research outcomes. Consequently, experimental ethnography has converged toward the creative realm of literary works, and in the context of *The Absurd Generation*, Trilobite and Zhao Haitian conducted a field investigation in Zhao Gongzhuang. While the results were not presented as a research paper typical of functionalist ethnography, they instead took on the characteristics of experimental ethnography. However, it is essential to note that *The Absurd Generation* remains a literary work, interweaving the author's fictional ethnographic account into the narrative. Therefore, while it may adopt the form of experimental ethnography, its essence remains firmly rooted in fiction, in its literary nature.

Then why is literary nature so valuable in this novel? Literature holds value due to its ability to comprehensively explain and interpret social, historical, and personal experiences while delicately capturing the complexities of life and offering unique

¹³ After reading *The Golden Wing*, Zhuang Kongshao made five visits to the same county town depicted in the book, tracing the descendants of the Golden Wing family and the surviving individuals mentioned. He then wrote *The Silver Wings: Local Society and Cultural Changes in China (1920s-1980s)*, documenting local society and cultural transformations.

perspectives. It also partially accounts for the emergence of experimental ethnography, as logical analysis alone often fails to evoke emotional resonance while lyricism remains an important literary tradition. Experimental ethnography can bridge the gap by bringing science closer to emotions. In a sense, *The Absurd Generation* represents a transition from lyrical expression to rational analysis. The author endeavors to bridge the divide between sociology and literature by leveraging profound literary insights into human nature alongside the revelations offered by sociology on the mysteries of human existence, aggregation, and separation. Set within the vast countryside during the historical processes of Land Reform and mutual assistance, the novel provides profound insights into the enduring cultural coordination function within rural society. It illustrates the inheritance, practice, and dissemination of Chinese family cultural values, serving as critical spiritual pillars and codes of conduct for grassroots groups. While incorporating elements of ethnographic analysis, the novel's ultimate goal is to evoke a sense of literary sensibility. It delves into the profound impacts of material and cultural desolation, economic and spiritual impoverishment, and the complex mix of emotions experienced by the characters. The novel possesses depth and severity, yet it also exudes warmth and care. The story of Guizai exemplifies the paranoia and narrow-mindedness ingrained in human nature under the constraints of tradition. However, beyond depicting the spiritual alienation and distortion of the townspeople's minds, the novel also celebrates the goodness, simplicity, resilience, and tolerance inherent in human nature. It imparts a touch of warmth to the otherwise somber countryside. Reading the novel feels akin to standing before an extensive scroll, bearing witness to the quiet transformations of traditional culture and the vicissitudes of characters and destinies. As the Chinese people's spiritual homeland, the countryside no longer embodies the idyllic "poetic dwelling" of the Land of Peach Blossoms (桃花源 Tao Hua Yuan)¹⁴, characterized by simplicity and harmony. Instead, it unfolds as a vivid and intricate tapestry of multifaceted existence.

III. Cultural Vision of Openness and Integration

Bob Dylan eloquently reflected on his era: "The world was being blown apart, and chaos was already driving its fist into the face of all new visitors. If you were born around this time or were living and alive, you could feel the old world go and the new one beginning. It was like putting the clock back to when B.C. became A.D. Everybody born around my time was a part of both" (28), describing how the profound shift from the old to the new world resonated with those born or living during that time. Similarly, the tumultuous nature of the times and the backdrop of constant change have also instilled chaos and anxiety in Zhao Lu's generation. In response, they embarked on a quest for a spiritual sanctuary and a poetic future, leading to a complex outward journey. The concept of "wandering," as defined by *The Modern Chinese Dictionary*, captures this sense of not having a permanent residence and constantly adapting to survive. It encompasses a search for belonging and a lack of a fixed home. The characters in the novel, as well as the author himself, reflect this feeling of homelessness. As Edward Said once noted, authors are

¹⁴ The Land of Peach Blossoms, known as 桃花源 (Táohuā Yuán) in Chinese, originates from an essay titled "The Peach Blossom Spring," written by Tao Yuanming (365 or 372 or 376 — 427) of the Jin Dynasty. The name is often used to describe an idealistic place of beauty and tranquility in Chinese culture.

deeply intertwined with their societies' history and social experiences, shaping and being shaped by them (Said, 1994, xxii). Zijiang Ding, an overseas Chinese writer, embodies a fusion of Chinese and foreign cultures in his physical environment. This cross-cultural and inclusive space, coupled with a sense of uncertainty, vividly depicts his overseas journey of "wandering" and his challenges. Being a citizen with cultural hybridity, Professor Ding experiences wandering without a support system while residing in a foreign land. Consequently, his works naturally incorporate the reality of his "spiritual wandering" experiences, deepening his emotional connection to his spiritual homeland.

Within modern Chinese literature, the theme of wandering has been explored by various schools of thought and from different artistic perspectives: Ai Wu's *Southward Journey* 南行記 portrays a group of vibrant vagabonds with an optimistic and open-minded outlook. Hong Lingfei's *Exile* depicts Shen Zhifei's constant movement in search of a spiritual home. Lu Ling's *The Children of the Wealthy Masters* 財主底兒女們 portrays Jiang Shaozu's challenging journey of wandering. Tian Han praises wanderlust as an essential aspect of an artist's life. Liang Yuchun, in his essay "On Vagabonds," "談'流浪漢'" romanticizes the wandering existence, celebrating the joy, imagination, and ability of vagabonds to bring happiness to others. However, what sets Ding apart from the writers above is that vagrancy is no longer for the nation's sake or lofty ideals, and being a wanderer is not excellent either. By wandering, he implies a departure from one's homeland, either forced by external circumstances or driven by an internal desire to explore the unknown, as the protagonist, Zhao Lu, embodies a diverse and intricate wanderlust. His experiences include active wandering, such as joining the Burmese Communist Party, and passive fleeing, like his encounters in the Gobi Desert, grassland tribes, and along the Yellow River. Amidst the confusion and restlessness of his mind and soul, he endures painful struggles, navigating the ebb and flow of life.

Despite the challenges, fleeting connections with individuals like "Sao Bantian" (騷半天) and Qiu Gu (秋姑) provide solace to his wandering spirit and temporary respite for his troubled mind. His attachment to Lin Yan is a beacon of hope in his life's salvation. Even in the face of arid deserts, scarcity of water, surrounding dangers, and material deprivation, Zhao Lu persists in his wandering, refusing to halt his journey. Perhaps the arduous trek of wandering has become symbolic of his idealistic personality and subjective spirit, with the pursuit of meaning residing within the process of seeking it. Zhao Lu possesses a resolute heart and an enterprising spirit that empower him to overcome the challenges and obstacles in his wandering life.

Ilya Ehrenburg, a Russian writer, once noted that a writer cannot write about everything or every character. Writers must choose characters and subjects that move them deeply and are closely linked to their own experiences (26). Ding's selection of Zhao Lu as a protagonist and the depiction of his wandering life reflects his and the contemporary Chinese intellectual's quest for the essence of existence. It depicts intellectuals transitioning from the confines of their study to the expansive realm of social reality, experiencing the trials and tribulations that shape their lives. It expresses the absurdity of life, the whimsicality of fate, the independence of the spirit, and the freedom of the mind, presenting a bleak and austere aesthetic style.

Just as Zhao Lu (nicknamed “Roadman” 路子)¹⁵ said after bidding farewell to the Yellow River and setting off on his “wandering journey,” “陸地與道路本相連，大地何處無路子。大路條條有，老子處處走。路子者，路雖不平，子行能通。” (The land is connected to the road, and there is no place in the world without a road. And I, as my name indicates, can connect to wherever I want to access (it) . Despite the unevenness of the road, I can make it through) (227). These words encapsulate Zhao Lu’s mindset while simultaneously showcasing the author’s expansive spiritual domain and yearning for a liberated and autonomous soul.

Since the late Qing Dynasty, when Chinese people first “opened their eyes to the world,” they have embraced the perspective of “perceiving the world while standing in China” (Zhou, 2009, 25), using China as their base to observe the world, comprehensively explore and seek knowledge in a detailed and nuanced manner. The sacrifices made by the predecessors paved the way for China’s global engagement. However, the question arises: What lies ahead for the Chinese people? How should they perceive the relationship between Chinese culture and global cultures? Ding introduces the concept of “New Comparativism,” which focuses on identifying “similarities and differences within universality” (Jin, 2019, 1). Professor Jin Huimin also opposes the “homogenization of literary concepts and interests” (1), and it has become widely accepted that cultures inherently possess differences. Nevertheless, humanity has undergone an extensive and challenging process of learning how to perceive and navigate these differences. As aptly stated by Ding, “Neither Western-centrism nor Oriental-centrism can become a ‘monistic civilization’ that monopolizes the world”(Ibid., 3). Professor Li Jikai further emphasizes the “Culture Break-in” idea, aiming to challenge binary and exclusive modes of thinking (Ziye & Li. 2020, 4). Mr. Ziye suggests that the essential lies in contextualizing different cultural parties “within a common body of life”(4). By viewing culture as a holistic entity, the differences become “internal contradictions” rather than “adversarial contradictions”(4).

In his novel, Ding skillfully contrasts urban intellectuals, representing city culture, with the villagers of “Longhuzhai” 龍虎寨, who embody rural culture. Zhao Lu, serving as a symbol of intellectuals, finds himself positioned alongside the barge haulers, representing the lower class. The wanderers exemplify traditional Chinese culture, while the merchants embody exotic cultures. The youth embody the vibrant spirit of reform and opening up, while the villagers hold conservative rural ideologies. Through these juxtapositions, the novel portrays the characters’ evolving perspectives on society, demonstrating their expanding horizons, shifting values, and the intricate process of cultural collision and reconciliation. It aligns with the concept of “culture Break-in” proposed by Li Jikai, which emphasizes the importance of engaging in dialogue, avoiding confrontation and mutual destruction, promoting cultural consensus and coexistence, and developing and revitalizing various cultures (151). The author’s recognition of the spirit of harmony within Chinese culture underscores the necessity of communication. By facilitating communication, interaction, and the juxtaposition of different cultures, the author endeavors to realize their cultural vision. The incorporation of mixed language from Chinese and foreign cultures and the utilization of intellectual resources symbolizes

¹⁵ As pointed out earlier, in English spelling, one homonym of “Lu” is “road,” and the other is “land.”

the gradual progress of “cultural Break-in” between different cultural spheres. These elements reflect the author’s personal experiences and reflections on the journey of “culture Break-in.”

Today, Chinese people can “perceive China while standing in the world”(Zhou, 2009, 26). This shifting position of China about the world results from China’s arduous journey towards global engagement. Throughout this challenging and crisis-ridden process of Culture Break-in, Professor Ding’s works overflow with “the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind” (Russell, 2000, 9). Just as the author describes Russell’s thoughts as “the illuminating light of knowledge”(Ding, 2017, 2) that enlightens readers, the works also emanate “strands of wisdom, conscience, and justice.” (Ibid., 1) Although their scope may be limited, they still exhibit the “undistortable hardness of humanistic convictions” (Ibid., 2) to counter the darkness and void of fate.

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